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# **'Only Degradation and Slavery?': The Figure of the Teacher in the Writing of Edward Upward**

*Simon Grimble*

The 1930s Group writers have often been accused of a disabling obsession with their own schooldays and the naming of this obsession has often been a cue for a damning of their politics, as if they had remained essentially juvenile revolutionaries in the period whose later political movement was therefore entirely predictable: in a language that the period instituted it was only a 'phase'. Of course, it is true that many of them had not just been schoolboys: they became teachers and some, such as Auden, were engaged practitioners who thought and wrote about education. Education is always a political question, but in the 1930s it could be said that this was particularly the case: education was the means by which cells or elites or cadres or corps who could influence public life could come into existence. Pupils could be 'trained', to use the I.A. Richards / F.R. Leavis formulation, and perhaps they could become the shock troops of revolution (this is the era of the Hitler Youth and the Komsomol, the youth division of the Soviet Communist Party), or at least they could preserve 'minority culture' against a bloated 'mass civilisation'.<sup>1</sup> So the experience of being a teacher and the practice of thinking about education and its consequences were both common to the period.

But we could say that Edward Upward was unusual amongst those 1930s writers for two reasons: not only did he remain a member of the Communist Party of Great

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<sup>1</sup> F.R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (Cambridge: Minority Press, 1930). Many thanks to James Smith and, especially, Benjamin Kohlmann for their help with this article.

Britain after the 1930s, only breaking with the party in 1948 over its policy of support for the Labour government, he also remained a teacher. Upward taught at Alleyn's School in Dulwich in south-east London, from 1932 to 1961, in the process becoming the school's first Head of English. Alleyn's was and is a private, day-school, which became a 'Public School' through joining the Headmaster's Conference in 1919, but which was a 'direct-grant school', a self-governing institution partially supported by the state in return for offering places to holders of local authority scholarships, between 1958 and 1975. Through this extended period of political crisis – through the Great Depression, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, the Spanish Civil War and the Popular Front, Munich, the Nazi-Soviet pact, the Second World War, the 1945 Labour government, the Cold War, the death of Stalin, Hungary, Suez, CND and the rise of the New Left – Edward Upward went to the same school every day during term and taught boys from the age of 13 to 18. In the early 1950s he took a year's sabbatical from Alleyn's to try to overcome his writing block, but that was the only exception to his pattern of work. What conclusions can be drawn from this length of service? Firstly, perhaps, that the Communism and the teaching were linked. In order to be a good, consistent and reliable party member, Upward needed, and as recommended by the party, to keep a stable job, and one in which there was at least some time and space in which to do party work. Secondly, that he possessed a singular quality of persistence both in his life and in his work: of course, it appears that through his long life he had more time to both try things and to stick to things than the majority of mankind, but it was this determination to work things out and to see them through that marked Upward as both a man and as a writer. The presumed callowness of the 1930s writers, both as political radicals and as teachers and thinkers about education, is very far from being in

question with him. But at the same time, Upward lets us know how problematic and ambiguous politics and teaching are for a figure like himself: when one makes the journey to the border towards a life of political commitment there is a strong imagining that intellectual difficulties will cease once one has ‘gone over’, even if the individual is henceforward committed to a life of political struggle, but, in fact, those difficulties never end in Upward's writing. The tensions involved in this relationship between revolt and constraint, between the regularity of the school bell and revolution, are the subject of the essay.

It is clear that being a teacher was at no point an unproblematic occupation for Upward: he was not prepared to think of years of life as sacrificed for the party, packaged up and parcelled for the dustbin of history. He knew, as Alan Sebrill, his alter-ego, knows in *The Spiral Ascent*, that there was, of course, something humiliating in being a left-wing teacher at a private school, and that there may, possibly, be something humiliating in being a teacher at all. As Lenin, the son of two teachers and dedicated thinker about education had written about Communist Russia, ‘our schoolteacher should be raised to a standard he has never achieved, and cannot achieve, in bourgeois society’, ‘mainly, mainly and mainly’ by improving his position materially.<sup>2</sup> But in capitalist societies, teachers would remain ‘the bulwark of the bourgeois system’. Upward’s struggle, as a teacher, was to maintain his spirits in a situation where he found himself grossly compromised. An entry from his diary from February 1934, two years after he had taken up the job at Alleyn’s, expresses his difficulties. On the one hand, Upward had to avoid the possibility of being sacked, to which ‘my present fatalistic, desperate

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<sup>2</sup> V.I. Lenin, ‘Pages From A Diary’, in Lenin, *Collected Works* (45 vols, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1965), vol. 33, p. 464.

attitude' made him vulnerable. As such he had to reconcile himself 'to be an educator in a situation which is after all not entirely hopeless from the point of view of education. Bad but not hopeless. Far less bad than it would be in an elementary school.' An important part of the education Upward was thinking of here was that of his colleagues, who he had to fight to gain the confidence of, so that he could influence them in the direction of Communism. But the overall mood is that of teaching as an existential struggle: 'Schoolwork is a fight, and I have got to fight to live, not to die' (4: 27 February 1934). The drama here is almost certainly related to the character of Upward as a teacher, where his 'fatalistic, desperate attitude' manifested itself to the pupils as vulnerability. Alan Ross, a former student of Upward's at Alleyn's, remarked on how pupils could respond to him: 'He was more than bullied, I think he was derided and picked on ... there was a kind of humbleness, humility about Edward which invited the cruelty that schoolboys are capable of.'<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, such factors may explain the thoughts of Alan Sebrill in his existential crisis in the early chapters of *In The Thirties*, the first book of *The Spiral Ascent*, where Sebrill is experiencing the final break-up of his desire to live purely as a poet:

Or if he did at length move, and if he went and found the notepaper, and if he succeeded in bringing himself to the point of writing a letter to the agency, and if ultimately in spite of his rolling-stone record some headmaster or board of governors could be gulled by his academic qualifications or, more likely, by his classy public-school education into offering him a teaching post, could he bear once again to live as a schoolmaster? Could he, after the final failure of what he

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Alan Ross, Huntington Library, Christopher Isherwood Papers, item FAC 1378.

seemed born for, go back to a job which injured and exhausted even those who had an aptitude for it and which would bring him only degradation and slavery?

He would very much rather be dead.<sup>4</sup>

However, one of the effects of Sebrill's new commitment to the Communist Party which enables him to escape from this crisis without 'madness or death' is the necessity to take up teaching as the only work that seems appropriate and fairly readily available.<sup>5</sup> Sebrill manages to find a position at a suburban London private school, and much of the book is concerned with how Sebrill manages this environment: how he attempts to seek members for the party and to generally raise consciousness amongst the teachers, and how he tries to manage the conflict between his desire to teach in a 'progressive' way and the fact that such attempts draw attention to him, mark him out for contempt from the boys and consequently make his position at the school more precarious. The novel mirrors Upward's years at Alleyn's in the 1930s, a life which found its nexus in his membership of the editorial board of a journal called *The Ploughshare, the Organ of the Teachers' Anti-War Movement*, in the years from 1934 to 1938: the nexus because this organisation and its journal were a front for the Communist Party, and were used as a means of recruiting for the party, but also because Upward published a number of pieces of short fiction about teaching in its pages. *In The Thirties* gives the atmosphere of those years, and the atmosphere of these two very different, yet also largely enclosed worlds, of the school and the Communist Party, and describes the effects of the physical and moral atmospheres which permeated and informed those twin environments: twin

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Upward, *In the Thirties*, in *The Spiral Ascent: A Trilogy* (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

because they both give a certain order to Sebrill's existence, and operate at a certain distance from the more contingent world that lies between them.

The school of *In the Thirties* is very precisely placed by Upward in the social world from which it derives. It is a private school which takes its pupils from the local middle-classes, but it is runs along lines that mimic those of public schools: “‘We’re a cheap petty-bourgeois snob-imitation’” , Sebrill thinks in a moment of anger, shortly after having been summoned to the headmaster to explain his lack of success and popularity as a teacher.<sup>6</sup> The social historian Ross McKibbin has written that a primary role of such schools in the period was to provide a kind of class uplift: ‘The private schools could ... be relied upon to give polish or to eliminate tell-tale signs of a local “accent”.’<sup>7</sup> Boys so educated could then float freely upwards in the class-structure, rather than being marked or weighed down by these local signs of origin. In educational terms, however, McKibbin argues that boys’ private schools were often associated with failure: ‘staffed by teachers who could not find posts in “better” schools; used by parents who could not pay public school fees; attended by boys who could not win places at grammar schools.’<sup>8</sup> The most influential representation of such schools in the period is that of the grotesquely inadequate Llanabba Castle in Evelyn Waugh’s *Decline and Fall* (1928), the eventual employer of the unfortunate Paul Pennyfeather after he is sent down from Oxford. Llanabba has the status of ‘School’ in the rankings of the academic agents, Church and Gargoyle (Waugh’s version of Gabbitas, Truman and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918-1951: A Study of a Democratic Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 236.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Thring), and when Paul doubts his qualifications for the job, Church and Gargoyle's representative swiftly puts his mind at rest:

“Between ourselves, Llanabba hasn't a good name in the profession. We class schools, you see, into four grades: Leading School, First-rate School, Good School and School. Frankly”, said Mr Levy, “School is pretty bad. I think you'll find it a very suitable post.”<sup>9</sup>

The school of *In The Thirties* is clearly not in this league, but it does share some of the pretension and presumed rottenness of a decaying social structure which, nevertheless, refuses to pass on. However, the concerns of *Decline and Fall* predate those of *In The Thirties* by a few crucial years. Paul Pennyfeather ends up at Llanabba Castle because of his having been sent down from Oxford: without this unlucky turn of events, it is presumed that he would have followed a more privileged calling. The 1929–1931 Depression made it more likely that university graduates and some intellectuals would seek work in areas that they perhaps otherwise would not have considered, such as teaching, and in areas of that profession that they otherwise would not have considered. Teaching became one resort of the ‘unemployed Cambridge graduate’ named amongst the roll-call of those who have ‘nothing to lose but their aitches’ in the last paragraph of George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Along with this move toward teaching, there co-existed a political radicalisation amongst teachers: as membership of the Communist Party rose in the 1930s, and rose disproportionately amongst the professional classes, the largest section of the new recruits were teachers, perhaps because their very membership of the ‘professional classes’ was experienced as insecure and a matter for

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<sup>9</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall* [1928] (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 17.



debate.<sup>10</sup> So, as the 1930s saw the entry of middle-class intellectuals into a Communist Party which been almost entirely working-class in the nineteen-twenties, teachers played a leading role, and Alan Sebrill is representative rather than atypical of these more widespread social changes.

As with all areas of education and politics, these changes saw arguments about naming. An exchange between Sebrill and the Second Master, Aldershaw, early in *In The Thirties* specifies the problem. Aldershaw has taken down a leaflet for the Educational Workers' League that Sebrill had pinned to the staffroom notice board:

“Luckily I removed your notice before the Head had an opportunity to read it. That word “teachers” which appears so prominently in it would have been like a red rag to him. We’re all “schoolmasters”, of course, in our type of school. ” Aldershaw gave Alan what appeared to be a glance of collusion. (73)

Here, the more democratic, gender non-specific, ‘teacher’ is borne down by the ‘schoolmaster’, guardian of values and the schoolroom, a man who can give ‘tone’ to the most wayward schoolboy population. Aldershaw colludes with an implicit critique of these ideas, but, as far as Sebrill is concerned, he also colludes with the existing order at the school and with the capitalist society that extends beyond it. The two have an argument about the current ‘Crisis’, and Sebrill is troubled by why Aldershaw, a former member of the Labour party, defends capitalism and imperialism.

Presumably he gained something out of them. Or if he didn’t, if he lived and kept a family solely on a teacher’s salary without any private income from

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<sup>10</sup> See Stephen R. Parsons, ‘Communism in the Professions: The Organisation of the British Communist Party among Professional Workers, 1933–1956’, PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1990.

investments, that made his defence of them even more contemptible. But most likely he owned some shares and lived in a newish suburban house with bay windows and a studded oak door, and an electric bulb in a sham-antique lantern over the porch, and an asbestos-walled garden, and a concrete crazy-pavement, and a garden with concrete walks and regimented flowers, and forsythia in April and buddleia in August. At the thought of the concrete crazy-pavement Alan's rage rose to its climax, and after that it declined and was slowly superseded by the beginnings of another and quite different feeling – of anxiety. (82-3)

There is a joke here about Sebrill's own snobbery about suburban housing, but he thinks that what Aldershaw does not realise is that he is conniving at his own 'slavery and degradation': a 'schoolmaster' in a private school is a kind of servant, in that he renders a service to his ultimate employers, the parents, for which they pay directly (rather than through the intermediary of the state), a servant whose immediate masters, ironically, are the very boys who they instruct and discipline. For Marx, the worst thing was to be in the power of another, and capitalism is this scheme writ large, but for the 'schoolmaster' it is possible to be at once oppressed and infantilised, because he is in the power of the schoolboy. No wonder the occasional use of dark sarcasm in the classroom.

For Sebrill, the arrival of a Communist society would lead to the end of these humiliations, and yet the world of the school in *In The Thirties* seems obdurate, hard to destroy or re-imagine. These difficulties are all the more striking in the uneasy pieces of short fiction that Upward had contributed twenty years earlier to the uneasy pages of *The Ploughshare* under the pseudonym of 'Edfu', fragments of writing that are normally concerned with teachers, schools and the need for consciousness raising

activities. However, the pieces are very problematic as polemic or propaganda, precisely because the ‘atmosphere’ of the school portrayed in them seems so particularly hard to shift; it permeates all aspects of consciousness. In ‘Peace Talk’, a story from the issue of January 1935, Upward describes the scene in school as the headmaster gives a speech about Armistice Day (using Armistice Day as an opportunity to promote dissent with militarism was a recurrent theme in *The Ploughshare*). The protagonist, Mitchel, tries to listen, but becomes preoccupied with something else:

The smell in the hall was difficult to analyse, he thought; it did not crudely advertise its origins like the smells which some schools had to put up with – fish smells, soap-factory smells, tannery smells. Perhaps it was not really a smell at all, was something subtler, less physical. An atmosphere, the peculiar essence of this school, manifesting itself everywhere here, in the dark corridors, in the classrooms, in the foggy white windows of the hall, the dingy gilt-lettered Honours boards, the three hundred boys listening to the headmaster without fidgeting, the expressionless faces of the staff listening at the back of the hall. A faintly sweet atmosphere, an atmosphere of good intentions, vague, uneasy, debilitating. No one in this school could escape its taint. It infected even energetic Henry, converted at times his natural liveliness into a mechanical heartiness, his zest for the job into a meaningless officiousness. It infected Mitchel, even though he was fully conscious of it and hated it. An anaesthetic atmosphere, drugging all his faculties, befogging thought, sight, hearing. If he didn’t pull himself up sharply he would soon be incapable of struggling against

it, would degenerate into a solipsist with no interest in anything that anyone thought or said.<sup>11</sup>

What is telling here is the focus on the ‘smell’ and ensuing atmosphere of the school: this school is not tainted by the smell of any surrounding production or industrial process; we are not in a working-class environment here. Like the boys who lose their accents in Ross McKibbin’s description of private schools, this school does not ‘advertise its origins’. Instead, it is removed from an encircling social world; it has a ‘peculiar essence’ which leads to a pervasive lack of clarity: ‘the foggy white windows’, ‘the dingy gilt-lettered Honours boards’, ‘the expressionless faces of the staff’. What the school has preserved is a now curdled Victorian altruism, ‘an atmosphere of good intentions’ that is now ‘vague, uneasy, debilitating’; it has been widely remarked that the public schools of the period gave an impression of an antiquated Victorianism, cut off from and shutting out the contemporary world. And this atmosphere ‘infects’ Mitchel, anaesthetises him, because it presumes that no-one believes what they say anymore – it is not that they are insincere, it is that they have lost an idea of what sincerity might sound like. In that process, in that loss of identity, the boys, the staff, the headmaster become shades, self-enclosed, at a remove, and from here follows Mitchel’s concern that all of this could turn him into a solipsist (and, as argued elsewhere in this collection, it is clear that the fear and the possibility of solipsism is something that runs through all of Upward’s work). In the story that follows, Mitchel rouses himself from this mental cloudiness to debate the inadequacies of the headmaster’s speech with his colleague Henry, whilst being careful not to give himself away as a Communist (this is presumably a form of advice to the teachers reading *The Ploughshare*), thinking to

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Peace Talk’, in *The Ploughshare: Organ of the Teachers’ Anti-War Movement*, January 1935, p. 4.

himself ‘It is my business to speak his language, not his to speak mine.’ The story ends with Mitchel making a plea, so that the whole staffroom can hear, that ‘one of the most practical things we can do to hinder the people who are preparing for another war is to demand generous expenditure on education rather than on armaments’. This mild subversion has the effect of doing ‘something to counteract the talk they had heard in the hall, something towards dispersing the peculiar atmosphere, subtler than any aroma, of this school.’<sup>12</sup>

However, it’s not certain how far this subversion goes in clearing the air, either in this imaginary school or in Upward’s own pervasive sense of political depression in the period. The unrealness of the contemporary school was emphasised by other writers: for Auden, it is related to the more widespread loss of a sense of social purpose in the years after the two cataclysms of the Great War and the Great Depression; he would write that ‘the failure of modern education lies not in its attention to individual needs, nor to methods, nor even to the moral ideas it preaches, but in the fact that nobody genuinely believes in our society, for which the children are being trained.’<sup>13</sup> *The Ploughshare* of November-December 1935 has an anonymous piece entitled ‘Autumn, 1935’, which similarly imagines an unreconstructable environment of ‘dead leaves’ and ‘poky little houses and hoardings and shops’: it’s a Tennysonian, morbid combination of ‘the woods decay, the woods decay and fall’ and ‘on the bald street breaks the blank day’, even as the speaker professes that ‘the thought of autumn woods irritated him,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> W.H. Auden, review of Bertrand Russell, *Education and the Social Order*, in *The New Statesman*, 15 October 1932, repr. in Edward Mendelson (ed.), *The English Auden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p. 315.

seemed sentimental'.<sup>14</sup> Once again there is an attempt to move from this depressive base into a need for political activity, this time in supporting Abyssinia in its struggle against Mussolini's invasion, but one can see why 'Peace Talk' should have been concerned about solipsism: in both pieces there's a sense of an ongoing internal monologue that occasionally finds this strange expression in the pages of *The Ploughshare* but where the protagonist remains strongly aware of his own isolation and very fearful that his political hopes and projects will remain disappointed. As such, these fragments seem to be diagnoses of Upward's feelings as a teacher at this time: they are committed and engaged, but the question remains as to what should happen when the small political epiphanies they work towards are over. The question is that posed by the first number of *The Ploughshare*: 'Is the effort futile? Who can say which effort shall not prove essential whether successful or not?'<sup>15</sup> And the fact that *The Ploughshare* had to veil its existence as a Communist publication must have added to these feelings of doubt and insecurity,<sup>16</sup> as did its concern that it was talking merely to a narrow elite: 'it feels that

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<sup>14</sup> Anonymous, 'Autumn, 1935', *The Ploughshare*, November–December 1935, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Anonymous, 'The Present Situation', *The Ploughshare*, January 1934, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Although clearly the Communist Party's continued anxieties about observation by the British state were well justified. There is evidence that *The Ploughshare* was considered a dangerous publication: the British Library's copy for the issue of January, 1935 is stamped in red ink on the title page: 'WARNING! Members of H.M. Forces should not come into possession of this Journal', before continuing, more liberally, 'NOTE. – This in no way applies to their relatives.' This seems to refer to the 'Incitement to Disaffection Bill', passed in 1934 after MI5 pressure, which sought to prevent Communist or other kinds of propaganda being disseminated amongst the British armed services. MI5 appears, unsurprisingly, to have also kept a file on Upward (Personal File 43370) and may well have traced *The Ploughshare*'s contributors and subscribers, as they did for the *Left Review* and other suspect publications.

too often it is preaching to the converted'.<sup>17</sup> But, at same time, the range and importance of *The Ploughshare*'s contributors should not be underestimated: it includes not just Upward's friends, Isherwood and Auden, but also a number of different representatives of progressive opinion, including Winifred Holtby, Havelock Ellis, Amabel Williams-Ellis and the peace campaigner and former colonial administrator, the Earl of Lytton (a contribution from J.B.S. Haldane is promised but does not appear).

*In The Thirties* revisits these moods from Upward's perspective of the 1950s, and he does not spare the reader or Alan Sebrill in its account of the doubts, the revisions, the arguments, the self-monitoring and the self-criticism: the moments of revelation, albeit seemingly transitory, of the two stories are again exhibited, but always placed and qualified as we see the consciousness of Alan Sebrill being fashioned over time; there isn't a simple story about *Bildung* here, or even anything as comparatively straightforward as a dialectic. Sebrill escapes dismissal from his post at the school partly because of the headmaster's snobbish admiration for the fact that he was educated at Repton (Upward's own public school), even whilst the Headmaster despises and resents Sebrill for his political affiliations and for not acting like an ex-public school boy: "“Really you should not be having this trouble with discipline. After all, you yourself as a boy were educated at Reptile” – he quickly corrected this – “I mean at Repton”" (124). Sebrill still wears the marks, has the smell, of a certain kind of atmosphere, a smell that, ironically, will allow him to continue with his dedication to the party, even as it allows the ritual daily humiliations of 'schoolmastering' to continue.

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<sup>17</sup> Anonymous, 'Christmas Stock-Taking', *The Ploughshare*, January 1935, p. 10.

In that sense, Sebrill is able to take advantage of the great claim of the public school that they would mark their students as those who would be able to move frictionlessly upward in their social strata, or at least prevent any alarming descents. For Upward, the experience of private education could produce other kinds of marking or branding which were much less desirable: in 'The Railway Accident', the headmaster of Frisbald College, Gustave Shreeve, remarks on the character of the teacher Harold Wrygrave, who has been "surprised in the act" of an unnamed sexual misdemeanour, that his "vice is branded on his face".<sup>18</sup> So, to be marked is to be given certain privileges but it can also be to be known and judged in an imprisoning environment, where Shreeve suggests that he is now able to control Wrygrave by the use of blackmail. As well as the more direct imprisonment and control implied here, Wrygrave is also condemned to life as one of 'the classic English types' mentioned by Isherwood in his introduction to the story.<sup>19</sup> It is perhaps no surprise in this context that it is Wrygrave who is arrested at the end of the novel on the charge of causing the accident that the story partly describes: a willed violence that marks his frustration at this particular imprisoning context.

Sebrill himself then forms a parallel with Wrygrave in his being marked by the experience of school, but which then includes a feeling of violence toward this institution and what it represents, but which also involves a certain cultural capital which he is able to deploy as both a school teacher and as a member of the Communist Party. When the onset of the depression saw the entry of disaffected professionals and

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<sup>18</sup> Edward Upward, 'The Railway Accident', in *The Railway Accident and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 53, 57.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.



especially teachers into the party, after initial doubts, such figures were, according to leading Communist R. Palme Dutt, more welcome than the ‘essentially vacillating’ character of the petite (or, petty) bourgeoisie.<sup>20</sup> Such members of the middle or upper middle classes were more trustworthy presumably than the petit-bourgeois because they had had to fully commit themselves in a journey which was not just ‘to’ the border, but one where they now explored the undiscovered country on the other side. The petit-bourgeois, on the other hand, growing up either far closer to that border, or perhaps in some way straddling it, was pictured as someone who could more easily slide back into a traitorous rejection of the working-class movement, particularly because in his ‘pettiness’ (due to an imagining of his shop-keeper origins) he was imagined as susceptible to the bribery and entrapment of the secret services. For the bourgeois convert, the problems that were imagined were much more of an internal nature, and particularly revolved around the tendencies inherent in the category of possibly being an ‘intellectual’. Palme Dutt’s advice to these converts was as follows: ‘First and foremost he should *forget that he is an intellectual* (except in moments of necessary self-criticism) *and remember only that he is a Communist*.’<sup>21</sup> The whole of *The Spiral Ascent* might be read as a comment on that statement: Upward clearly wants to maintain that all of the self-reflection that Sebrill is characterised as producing in the trilogy is, in fact, ‘necessary self-criticism’, rather than something that is needless, ineffective, and self-disabling of the ability to participate in the movement toward radical political change. At the same time, he is haunted by the possibility that it might be composed of exactly

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927–1941* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), p. 205.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 206.

those things: Sebrill's very name could be said to hint at a 'cerebral' character that it is primarily involved with an inward, intellectual, abstract world, an interpretation of the world, rather than one where, for the writer, the point is to change it.

Furthermore, it can be argued that this structure of mind – caught between self-consciousness, political action and the creation of literature – is in fact itself produced by the particularities of Sebrill/Upward's own experience of education, even though these particularities are characteristic of those of his class in the period. Sebrill is, of course, sent away to school, first to prep-school ('Marchfield') and then to boarding school ('Rugtonstead'), as described in *No Home But the Struggle*. Marchfield begins, notably, 'a life of exile'<sup>22</sup>, a process of estrangement from self, family, place and identity, where 'it was I who had become estranged from what I had longed for, and school had made me become so' (596). Out of this splitting of the self, poetry becomes the way to provide an escape from this, into a more utopian world, which can connect back to the world of earlier childhood. More pragmatically, as it were, poetry provides also a space for privacy in a world where this quality is very hard to find – 'there was almost nowhere at this school where a boy could be private for long: in Dunton House ... even the lavatories had doors whose lower halves were cut away so that at least the legs of the occupants could be seen from outside' (604).

In this context of possible perpetual observation, where the cutting away of the doors could be to discourage the boys from illicit sexual behaviour but also to impress on them the necessity of being engaged in 'useful' activities (rather than day-dreaming, or reading on the toilet), the reading and writing of poetry provides a release but also a potential source of solipsism for Sebrill. He describes reading poems he had copied out

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<sup>22</sup> Edward Upward, *No Home But the Struggle*, in *The Spiral Ascent*, p. 523.

from anthologies into a notebook, probably during the time ‘when we were all supposed to be doing our prep. for the next day’s lessons’:

the poems must have had so strong an effect on my emotions that beside freeing me temporarily from the unhappiness which the school normally caused in me they made me very nearly oblivious of other boys who must have been in the room with me and may have been sitting at the same table. (604)

Poetry has the effect of temporarily freeing Sebrill from ‘unhappiness’, but it also makes him nearly ‘oblivious’ of the other boys: it therefore represents an escape from the immediate environment, but marks an entry into a world that he could potentially struggle to relate back to this environment, and which therefore makes one less able to communicate with this world, rather than making one more able. Poetry provides a form of escape but it also therefore isolates the individual – until, the idea is, the composition of the lasting work of poetry which then opens up a form of communication with the future (as opposed to the inadequate work which is confined in the moment of its production). Sebrill comes to think he has this creative capacity, partially perhaps due to his father’s regarding of him as particularly ‘special’: Sebrill recounts his father visiting his bedroom at home and whispering to him “‘You are my eldest boy and you are my best boy.’” (559) Sebrill expands on the effect on him of this ‘feudal idea of primogeniture’: ‘I began to see myself as someone out of the ordinary, from whom much was expected; and this was to result many times in wretchedness for me when I grew older.’ (560) So, in this scheme of thought, poetry becomes the place where Sebrill is to realise his specialness, his genius, and yet whilst it allows a release into a world of imagination away from the imprisonments of school, it also occasions a

profound anxiety that these insights will not be relatable to the world which extends beyond himself.

As such, the 'life of exile' threatens to remain as a permanent condition. This is particularly because literary production and consumption must normally take place in a position of 'obliviousness' of others or in a place of removal from others (the school holidays). After taking up the twin responsibilities of teaching and politics, we know that Upward found it difficult to find the time and energy to do his own writing. Even after freeing himself from this world, *The Spiral Ascent* is still a *Künstlerroman* which is about how difficult it is to write, or at least to write well. In that sense the experience of school sponsored a Romanticism in Upward's conception of writing that he would struggle to square with either socialist realism in particular or with any attempt to make the writer feel that in his work he was communicating with everyday life (and politics) rather than further removing himself from it. In that sense there is always the fear that writing itself is also potentially a masturbatory impulse, destined to fall on stony ground. In his complex feelings here Upward was likely to have been influenced by his own Nonconformist background (if we think of Nonconformists as proponents of moral effort who could end up making the morally effortful feel isolated) and by the highly ambivalent messages promoted by English public schools – on the one hand, explicit campaigners for 'moral purity', on the other, institutions by which their very removal from everyday life, tended to promote the 'solitary vice' to which they were most opposed. As even progressive writers about public schools would say in the period about sexual life in those schools: 'we believe also that there is a very great deal of that

purely personal self-indulgence, that purely self-regarding licentiousness, which is the cause of so much unhappiness in boyhood'.<sup>23</sup>

One of the consequences of the experience of this kind of environment is a particular attitude towards time. Upward's imagination is provoked by the possibility that the divisions of time that characterise English society and its education system can be overthrown: 'The Railway Accident' begins with conjuring the possibilities of what could happen if one got on the wrong train because of a sudden change in the train timetable, the thought of which causes Shreeve to panic: "I can tell you that alterations in the scheduled times aren't made over the breakfast table. If they are, well, God help us."<sup>24</sup> Such changes could lead, according to Hearn, to being 'ten minutes late for an appointment and you lose a rattling good post in the colonies which would have made you for life' (43). The prompt running of the train timetable therefore characterises the preservation of social order which makes the running of the empire and social advancement for those sufficiently privileged possible. Without it, there run fears of anarchy and social collapse. But here Upward also identifies with Wrygrave, the supposed train wrecker, later glimpsed by Hearn from their compartment, but a possibility denied by Shreeve as "Wrygrave always takes the Upper Fourth in French at this hour on Wednesdays." Hearn counters "that he must have mislaid his timetable" (53). School timetables, just as train timetables, are a constitutive part of this social order, but 'The Railway Accident' imagines a world where these disciplines of time management seem always to be threatened – the accident itself is described as both a

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<sup>23</sup> Victor Gollancz and David Somervell, *The School and the World* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1919), p. 75.

<sup>24</sup> Upward, 'The Railway Accident', p. 43.

speeding up, a rushing toward destruction and a slowing down, where many things can be seen and described in a short space of time – but which are never actually defeated: Wrygrave is arrested and presumably another teacher is appointed to take the Upper Fourth for French on Wednesdays at Frisbald College.

Despite the apparent anarchy of the imaginings here, Upward would still be drawn to, not unrelated, disciplines of time management in both his writing and his later career as a teacher. For the tutor in *Journey to the Border*, the attractions in his present position are characterised in part by the reassuring way in which they divide time, provide him with food and drink apparently without any of the hindrances of his own domestic labour and leave him some space for his own writing:

For the sake of snugness, for beer at lunch and dinner, for early morning tea and a bright bedroom with a view of rooks' nests among the tree-tops, for the sake of preserving a small private room in his mind to which he could always retire and in which he could pose as an intellectual experimenter, for the hope of holding a job which was after all less strenuous and less likely to encroach on his imaginary leisure than most other jobs. He had preserved nothing.<sup>25</sup>

That 'small private room in his mind' is the apparent reward for adherence to this particular timetable, as if the toilet cubicles of Rugtonstead really did become private and provide a space to 'pose as an intellectual experimenter'. *Journey to the Border*, of course, does try to expose how the comforts provided by this system are illusory, or at least ultimately unsatisfying, and yet the desire to find a different and more liberating form of time management on the other side of the border, where one has become a

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<sup>25</sup> Edward Upward, *Journey to the Border*, in *The Railway Accident*, p. 95.

Communist, is far from superseded: in the short story 'Sunday' the narrator thinks of his political conversion, but also that he will still 'go back to his lodgings for lunch. He will read the newspaper, but not for more than a quarter of an hour.'<sup>26</sup> For these incessant processes of self-control, which Upward's narrator has to put in place in the absence of a timetable but which seek to manage a kind of mental wandering or *indiscipline*, or at least to keep such things to a 'quarter of an hour', Upward/Sebrill are finally able to substitute the disciplines of time imposed both by the timetables of the school teacher and those of the life of the Party.

As Raphael Samuel has argued, membership of the CPGB involved a kind of 'time thrift' that echoed that practised by Protestant capitalists as described by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Communists were 'anxious to be "responsible"', whereas 'spontaneity was an invitation to adventurism; voluntarism, suspect; indiscipline, a disgrace.'<sup>27</sup> The consequence of these habits of a reformed way of managing everyday life would mean that, as Samuel puts it, 'the melodramatics of Communism had to do with abnegation rather than self-advertisement'.<sup>28</sup> In this way, the combined experiences of school and Communism could be said to have informed not just the content of much of Upward's writing, but also the style in which it is written: the character of the writing in *The Spiral Ascent* commemorates the urge to 'abnegation rather than self-advertisement', even as it describes many interiorised 'melodramatics' of self-doubt and self-criticism, especially

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<sup>26</sup> Edward Upward, 'Sunday', in *The Railway Accident*, p. 84.

<sup>27</sup> Raphael Samuel, 'Staying Power: The Lost World of British Communism, Part Two', *New Left Review*, I/156, March-April 1986, p. 82.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64

around Alan and Elsie's break with the Party in *The Rotten Elements*. And yet this method does not lead to a loss of complexity in Upward's writing, even if the desire of the party was to 'create an efficient machine of the class struggle' and that therefore writers should aim to reproduce that efficiency.<sup>29</sup> Instead, we are left with writings like *In The Thirties* that are, in Bernard Bergonzi's words, 'transparent but puzzling', where the tone can be 'almost unreadable'.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, just as 'The Railway Accident' sought to find an audience that would tolerate, even appreciate, its displacements and confusions, *The Spiral Ascent* exists to test the patience of a readership that was being confronted by writing that, in the words of Christopher Isherwood, is 'utterly unshowy': 'it makes no concession to popular taste.'<sup>31</sup> But in this there is a very strong desire to explain things, to himself and to others, to provide a reliable form of witness: these are, Robert Nye remarked in a review of *The Rotten Elements* and *The Railway Accident and Other Stories*, 'rich reports from arid places, the richer for their refusal to exaggerate'.<sup>32</sup> In that sense, Upward's writing, despite itself in so many ways, can still be located in traditions of spiritual uplift and moral struggle, that characterise the ways in which traditions of religious dissent were extended into a secularised twentieth century political radicalism, which sought to discipline the self in the search for higher callings. As Isherwood said 'Alan [Sebrill] is a moralist. I suppose that's rare in

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<sup>29</sup> Tom Bell, *The British Communist Party, A Short History* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1937), quoted in Samuel, 'Staying Power', p. 92.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *Reading the Thirties* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *Diaries* (3 vols, London: Methuen, 1996-2012), *Volume One – 1939–1960*, p. 784.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Nye, 'Speeding Towards Destruction', *The Times*, 2 August 1969, p. 20.



literature nowadays.’<sup>33</sup> And in that sense, Upward is a teacher in his writing, just as he was in his professional life.

As such, the recent revival of interest in him is as much about a concern with the moral life that he represents, with its attempt to find a relationship between the personal and the political, as it is about reconsidering a neglected moment and style in the history of twentieth century English writing. The reasons for that comparative neglect are too complicated to be addressed fully here, but they surely emerge out of the cultural Cold War, where to be seen as an advocate of Communism was to expose you to derision, marginality or worse. For the critic Samuel Hynes, writing in the 1970s, the attack on Upward was two pronged: firstly, to claim that the more avant-garde writing up to *Journey to the Border* was the expression of a disturbed mind: of the tutor in that novel he writes that ‘his disorder is rooted in his own weakness, for which political commitment is a cure as neurotic as the disease.’<sup>34</sup> The second claim is that the later writing, supposedly influenced by socialist realism, is unreadably boring, and therefore obviously the product of a levelling ideology: ‘the tension between his imagination and his political ideology shrivelled his natural gifts, and left him an arid, unimaginative, and unreadable realist.’<sup>35</sup> Perhaps only now can both Upward and his teachers be reclaimed as the representative figures that they were all along.

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<sup>33</sup> Isherwood, *Diaries*, p. 784.

<sup>34</sup> Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Bodley Head, 1976), p. 321

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 317.